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ABSTRACT

Although many studies have been conducted on the subject of writing, little research on the composing process itself can be found. One early study of significance is Janet Emig's "The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders," which compares school-sponsored writing with self-sponsored writing. Donald Graves, Lucy McCormick Calkins, and Donald Murray are leading researchers in the study of how young children compose. While these researchers advocate peer conferencing as a technique through which children learn to revise, questions remain about the relationship of peer conferencing and the revision of writing. A case study of four children with low, average, and high abilities in writing examines this relationship. Data were collected through observing the students while they composed, interviewing them formally and informally, transcribing the conferences between peers, and examining all writing drafts of these students for one semester. Results suggest that poor writers can effectively conference with their peers but are dependent on the questions of others in order to revise their writing, while average and good writers seem to be able to distance themselves from their writing, serving as their own audience and revising on their own. (Author/DF)

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Abstract

PEER CONFERENCING AND WRITING REVISION: A STUDY OF THE RELATIONSHIP

Connie Russell

Although many studies have been conducted on the subject of writing, little research on the composing process itself can be found. One early study of significance is Janet Emig's *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders* which compares school-sponsored writing with self-sponsored writing. Emig found students revised more readily and more frequently when involved in self-sponsored writing. Donald Graves, Lucy McCormick Calkins, and Donald Murray are leading researchers in the study of how young children compose. Their studies of young children in New Hampshire school rooms for two years prove that primary students can rehearse, draft, and revise in the same manner as a professional writer. While these researchers advocate peer conferencing as a technique through which children learn to revise, questions remain about the relationship of peer conferencing and the revision of writing. A case study of four children with low, average, and high abilities in writing examines this relationship. Data were collected through observing the students while they composed, interviewing them formally and informally, transcribing the conferences between peers, and examining all writing drafts of these students for one semester. The kinds of questions asked in conferencing, the types and numbers of revisions made, and the relationship of questioning and writing suggest that poor writers can effectively conference with their peers. Poor writers, however, are dependent on the questions of others in order to revise their own writing while average and good writers seem to be able to distance themselves from their writing. These writers can serve as their own audience, internalizing and examining their drafts, and revise on their own.

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Table of Contents

Chapter		Page
1.	Background for Conferencing.	1
2.	Review of the Literature	3
3.	Methodology.	5
4.	Results of the Study	7
5.	Conclusions.	15
Notes		16
Bibliography.		17
Appendixes		
A.	Interview Questions.	18
B.	Student Drafts	19
C.	Transcribed Conferences.	22

CHAPTER ONE

Background for Conferencing

Bridging the gap between research and classroom practice has long been a problem in education. When research appears to be contrary to current or past teaching methodology, teachers are understandably reluctant to incorporate the new ideas in their classrooms. Teachers, facing crowded curriculums and public pressure, must be sure promising research will result in sound classroom practices that enhance learning. Nowhere is this problem more evident than in the research on the teaching of process writing.

In particular, the research advocating peer conferencing as a method to aid students in revision of writing has been received with some skepticism by classroom teachers. While conferencing has been heralded as an effective method to help children revise, the relationship between conferencing and the ability to revise has not been established. This paper discusses my exploration of that relationship in my classroom.

I was first introduced to conferencing as a method to help elementary students revise writing in a writing workshop three years ago. Lucy McCormick Calkins, former research assistant of Donald Graves, shared her videotapes showing children conferencing with their teachers and peers.[1] Calkins used the term "conferencing" to denote a type of critiquing whereby a peer or the teacher questions students about the content of their writing. The questioning is meant to help children in subsequent revision of their drafts. The term "conference" was used interchangeably as a noun or verb.

The method intrigued me because children in my classroom were not revising content of their drafts, and I didn't know how to get them started. My attempts either resulted in me making decisions for them, thereby taking over ownership of their writing, or their working only to correct spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and other mechanics of writing. I decided I would try Calkins' technique when I returned to the classroom in the fall of 1981.

When school began, my sixth graders wrote daily. I introduced the students to the writing process, briefly explaining that they would be writing pieces of their choice as well as doing some teacher-assigned writing projects. Prewriting was kept in their journals, but drafting was completed on the back of used paper on which lines were one inch apart to make revision easier. The class also had one unpunctuated and uncapitalized sentence on the chalkboard each day which they were to write correctly in their journals. We went over these sentences orally before any lesson was begun.

My first lesson concerned focus of topic. I read quality papers from the previous year to the students and asked them what they liked about the stories. Most realized the stories made one "see it in your mind" or that "it was like I was there." I then asked the students to remember several summer activities that they enjoyed and to list them in their journals. They placed a check by the one topic they liked most. At this point the topics were very general, i.e., a trip to a fair or circus, staying at a cabin, or camping. Using a mapping or webbing form like a wheel with spokes, I had them write the topic they had

continued to meet individually and in groups with students who didn't feel confident about conferencing. These children were able to conference by themselves a few weeks later. Following conferencing, children returned to their seats to revise.

To make their revision easier, I taught the "cut and tape" method Calkins had introduced.[3] I found students reluctant at first, and when they made decisions about revising, I often had to actually cut their drafts apart for them. After all the years of trying to be neat, the act of messing up their drafts in order to make changes was incomprehensible to them. It wasn't long, however, before scissors and tape were fast-moving commodities in the room. The act of revising was catching on.

The most common type of content revision was the addition of information. Because these students were sixth graders with developed cognitive skills, however, they moved rapidly to other types of revision such as cutting, changing order, embedding, and changing syntactical structure. While peer conferencing appeared to be an effective technique, many questions and considerations plagued me. Could poor writers ask effective conference questions of their peers? What prewriting or rehearsal techniques did elementary students use? Was there a positive relationship between good writing and good conferencing? Did good writers do any revising on their own, orwere they limited to revision based on conference questions?

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

Examining the writing process rather than the product is a fairly new trend. Ironically, teachers have attempted to teach writing in schools without awareness of this process. Researchers who study the techniques of professional writers have gained knowledge that can help all writers. Accounts of E. M. Forster, T. S. Eliot, John Ciardi, Virginia Woolf, and a host of other writers have given some clues about the writing process but reveal limited data because only parts of the process are defined in their notes.[4] One of the first significant studies of students involved in the writing process was conducted by Janet Emig, who published her findings in *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders in 1971*.

In her report Emig compared reflexive writing (self-sponsored writing) with extensive writing (school-sponsored writing). She cited reflexive writing as having a far longer prewriting period. Students reformulated more frequently, interacted with a wider range of stimuli, paused for contemplation, and voluntarily revised.[5] Emig's study showed extensive writing as an experience that inhibits writers and moved them away from the writing process. The implications of this study are evident. Emig gave teachers an opportunity to review their teaching methods which, too often, stressed product rather than process. Because teachers rarely wrote, they were largely unaware of how writers composed. Emphasis on mechanics and absence of time for real revision only reaffirmed students' ideas about writing as a product to suit an audience of one—the teacher. Emig's work was informative because it offered profiles of specific students during the composing act. Her study opened the door to a new type of writing research.

Qualitative research in classrooms, where process as well as product are examined, gives researchers a better idea of how children write and, in many cases, information on why these children make certain choices in their writing. Field research also shows us the effect different methods of teaching and evaluation have on students. Donald Murray, professor of English at the University of New Hampshire, writer and researcher, has contributed greatly to our understanding of the composing process. His studies of signficant writers' attention to, and sharing of, how they write has helped teachers to better understand the writing process.[6] A Pulitzer prize winner himself, he has led many students to discover how they personally compose and many researchers to focus their attention on the development of beginning writers.

One of these researchers, Donald Graves, and his research assistants, Lucy Calkins and Susan Sowers, conducted a two-year study of young children in New Hampshire classrooms. For the first time, teachers learned that children as young as six can generate their own topics, draft, and revise just as professional writers do.[7] And, through the writing process, these children emerge as developing writers. While these children produce content, they also learn skills effectively because they apply the skills in their own writing.[8]

In her study of third graders, Calkins found four kinds of rewriting. Some children wrote several drafts without considering the early drafts when writing a new one. Calkins called these children "random drafters." Others merely copied their pieces many times, changing spelling, adding on, or improving penmanship. These were the "refiners." Other children moved back and forth between random drafting and refining. Calkins dubbed these students "transition children." The more advanced writers were revising content. They had discovered how to internalize, serving as their own audience. Looking forward and backward, these "interactors" were more flexible and introspective.[9]

The studies of researchers like Graves and Calkins have given us insight into the ways writers develop. At the same time, these studies raise new questions about these stages. Do the stages apply to all children? Do children begin as random drafters and move upward through each stage evolving as interactors, providing their education in the writing process continues in the same manner? How do children learn to move from one stage to the next?

At this point in time, researchers believe that students involved in process writing on a regular basis (preferably daily) will not only be more effective writers but better readers and learners as well. The lack of longitudinal and follow-up studies on children in these writing programs has made it difficult for researchers to do more than hypothesize concerning these results. Particularly, there is a lack of research on upper elementary students being introduced to the writing process for the first time. Fulfilling assignments, writing for an audience of one teacher, doing little or no revising, and emphasizing product rather than process make these older students a particular challenge for teachers trying to integrate researchers' findings and methods in their classrooms. School systems and teachers are reluctant to give up their textbooks, and children are reluctant to choose their own subjects and make their own decisions about writing. Shyness about sharing their writing and revealing themselves honestly only adds to the burden these older students carry. Revising content is new to them, and they have no ideas how or where to start.

Because revision is so important in improvement of writing, methods to encourage rewriting must be found. Conferencing seems to be one of the most effective ways to aid students in revising. Since teachers' time is limited, Calkins and Graves advocate the use of peer conferencing.[10]

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

While I was delighted with the results of peer conferencing in my room, my questions were still unanswered. I felt I had to justify the time spent with peer conferencing and validate its use if I were to continue my program. I decided to collect data in my own classroom with the hope that information gleaned from these data would give me answers to some of my questions about conferencing, revision, and the writing process itself with sixth graders.

I chose to conduct qualitative research with a select group of children for several reasons. This type of research would allow the students to remain in the classroom which was their natural setting for writing. I also believed research conducted in a real class during the school day would be more valuable to teachers than statistical research carried out in an unnatural environment. Hopefully, teachers might be encouraged to observe their own students more closely to obtain answers about the writing process.

I was well aware of the dangers of a participant observer conducting research, but I was also aware that I knew these children well and would have a better opportunity than an outsider to view them in a natural classroom environment while they wrote, conferenced, and revised.

Since process writing and conferencing were new to my sixth graders, I knew they would need the first semester to become comfortable with these methods and to learn how to conference effectively with their peers. Therefore, I would only be able to gather data in the second semester. (The following year they would move on to junior high school). Rather than surveying my entire class, I chose to do an in-depth study of four students. By choosing only four students, I would be able to collect all of their drafts and record all conferences. I felt that collection of all data for four students would give me more information about writing growth than periodic collection for an entire class.

Three of the four children studied had been in the same school since kindergarten, and one child had entered in third grade, coming from another school in the same system. The school, in a rural setting, is part of a school district containing nineteen elementary schools. Great contrast in socioeconomic levels stems from school boundaries encompassing an upper middle-class housing development as well as mobile housing with low-income families. The children chosen for my study represented both segments. Two of the children were studied for a semester. Unfortunately, one of the group, Sally*, moved in April so data were collected for three and one-half rather than four and one-half months for her. When I became aware that Sally would move, I chose another student, Bill, who was then in my study for three months. Interestingly enough, there were many differences between Bill and Sally even though they were both classified as low students in writing.

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*Names of the students have been changed to protect their anonymity.

In selecting the children for my study, I reviewed the writing subtests from the Sequential Tests of Educational Progress (STEP) for grades four and five and talked to former teachers about writing abilities and choices. Since I had taught these children for one semester, I also had my personal evaluation of student writing. In the cases of the four students chosen, the previous teachers and I were able to concur on the writing levels of these students. Bill and Sally had consistently scored 1 or 2 on local stanines of the STEP writing subtest, Ted had stanines of 4, 5, or 6; and Mary had had stanines of 8 or 9. The range is from a low of 1 to a high of 9. I taught these four children reading as well as writing. Reading scores corresponded with writing except in Ted's case. Although Ted's stanines were 6 and 7 in reading while Mary's were 8 and 9, Ted was in the top reading group with Mary and functioned capably using seventh and eighth grade materials in this group. Bill and Sally both read at approximately one year below grade level.

Mary was a student in the gifted program in our district, based on high intelligence scores as well as on class performance. While she was extremely interested in drama and writing and a top student in these areas, her domains of giftedness were science and math. Mary loved school and was active in both curricular and extracurricular activities. I noticed with Mary, as with other bright students, that she found revision difficult at first. Most students like Mary, because of their excellence in spelling, mechanics, and form, feel there is little to improve in their drafts. Improvement in the writing of these students is slow and more difficult to see, in my experience, than improvement in poor or average writers.

Ted was a capable student with a great deal of logic who had never put much effort into his writing. He was classified as an average writer who never achieved a grade above a C in the first semester. Ted's inclusion in the study turned out to be motivating for him because he became more attuned to his ability and to the importance of using it.

Sally was a prolific writer, but one who functioned like a younger student. She had no thought of audience and wrote as she remembered information, with no attention given to order or cohesiveness. Since her writing often involved page after page of rambling, the thought of revision was overwhelming to her.

Bill had experienced little success in school and had a lack of self-confidence. In the low group in reading, spelling, and math, he looked upon himself as a failure. Because he had so little success, he was a mild behavior problem during the early part of the year. With efforts by our school counselor and me, Bill began to realize that misbehavior robbed time from learning for him and that effort brought positive results, particularly in math and spelling. From January on, he took home good behavior certificates on a regular basis.

I planned to collect data on these four students through several methods in order to conduct a thorough study. The students had large envelopes into which they put all drafts of their writing. When they cut a strip out, intending to delete it, that piece was dated and placed in the envelope along with the other drafts. These drafts and excerpts would indicate the types and amount of revising the students carried out.

The students were also observed in all stages of the writing process. Observation of the students while they compose is a useful tool because the observer

often notes characteristics and habits of which the writers are unaware. The observation needed to be impartial and uninterrupted, an impossible task for me. A retired teacher was brought in to record every movement during the writing period. Because this observer had helped voluntarily in our school many times, the students were comfortable and in no way intimidated by her presence. Each student was observed for six or seven periods in order that the observer might take notes for all stages of the writing process. I also formally interviewed each of the students in the study and informally observed and questioned them during the semester. I believed that the students, because they were intermediate students, might be able to tell me why they made certain choices about their writing as well as how they viewed conferencing. Perhaps most important when these children conferenced with their peers on their own writing or the peers' writing, they would use a tape recorder throughout the conference. These tapes would be transcribed, enabling me to study the questions asked and compare them with the subsequent revisions made on their own writing. I could also find out what kinds of questions they asked of others. My conferences with these students were also recorded.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results of Study

Mary's conference questions often reflected lessons I was currently teaching or focused on writing techniques she was attempting in her own writing. Conferences with Brian and Tammy in January, for instance, contained questions dealing with "showing rather than telling" and with sentence combining. She asked Brian, "How did you feel? You said it was fun. What made it fun?" With Tammy, she asked, "Can you be more specific about the rain dances?" She asked both Brian and Tammy if they could combine some sentences and gave them illustrations of some of their short, choppy sentences. (At this time Mary was struggling with complex sentence structures. I found sentence fragments in her writing during this period indicating growth in her grammar and syntactical development).

However, Mary was able to ask questions at times that reflected her cognitive ability in analyzing and evaluating what the writer said. This was particularly true when the writer's subject was of great interest to Mary. When Sharon was working on a research project in science class, Mary's questions reflected her great interest as well as her scientific ability in her conference with Sharon on Sharon's report on aging:

> Mary: What does it mean, "exposed to the sunlight?" Just when you're old, exposure gives you wrinkles?
>
> Sharon: No, like in the garden all through the years. Your face is in the sun, and it loses moisture.
>
> Mary: You mean it dehydrates?
>
> Sharon: Well, sort of.
>
> Mary: You could tell that. Do you know how any of this stuff happens? Does it tell you in your books?
>
> Sharon: Umm—some parts it did.

Mary: Do lungs harden like arteries?

Sharon: I don't think so.

Mary: I didn't know the heart slows down when gray hair appears. Wow, I'll bet a lot of people don't know what happens when they're getting older.

In Mary's own narratives she was often unable to distinguish important information from needless details. While this can be a problem for writers, it has been much more common for me to find stories lacking detail rather than having too many details. It is possible that Mary included everything because of her work in science where thoroughness in observation is crucial. As the year progressed, Mary learned to cut much unnecessary information, but she always excelled in the expository mode rather than in the narrative mode of writing.

Mary also tended to overuse skills when I first taught them to her. Enamored with the colon, she had lists in her narratives for a period of time. When I stressed exact verbs to show what a writer meant, she would go through her drafts and underline every verb. Then she would use a thesaurus and conscientiously replace each one. Within a few weeks she would taper down to a justifiable use of a technique without anyone mentioning overuse to her. Probably, the overuse helped Mary to memorize a new technique.

Mary's fascination with new techniques involved more than punctuation and word substitution. An avid reader, Mary tried the sophisticated technique of interlocking two plots and two sets of characters in a fiction piece. After several attempts at this technique, which she had noticed in a book, and after conferencing with me, she gave up and never finished the piece. Obviously, she was not ready for this difficult skill. Her next piece was again the personal narrative form.

Mary usually revised sections based on questions her conference partners asked. However, she rejected any questions that she felt were already answered or that were not important to her; and she often made additional revisions on her own. For example, she changed awkward sentences continually, making them clearer. In her story about shopping with her friends, Mary conferenced with Tammy who asked Mary about her favorite part, whom she had expected to take with her, and why she missed the bus. Tammy also pointed out a repetitive sentence. Mary made the following revisions:

Added section on whom she called and who actually ended up going (in response to Tammy).

Changed sentence from "But to get us to the bus stop, my mom would take us and Mr. Smith would bring us home" to "My mom would take us to the bus stop, and Mr. Smith would bring us home."

Changed "I had to sit by this hippie" to "I had to sit by this guy."

Changed "Did we ever have fun shopping" to "We had so much fun shopping."

Changed "When we were done, we took the bus downtown" to "After we were done shopping at the Mall, we went

out to catch the bus downtown."

Changed "didn't get" to "wasn't able."

Changed "we" to "our trio."

Mary's revisions became more complex as the year progressed. She eventually changed order and used the embedding technique along with cutting and adding information. Her writing became more focused, and her leads and closing improved. Syntactically, her sentences rivaled those of experienced writers.

Ted, down-to-earth and logical, became more in demand as a conference partner during the year. The children knew he was a sharp questioner and that he could possibly help them when others failed. He was a joy in any oral discussion, and I was continually amazed at his ability to interpret material, analyze facts, and synthesize parts to form a new idea or relationship in social studies and reading discussions.

Ted's patience never wavered when he worked with Duane, a hearing-impaired student who read and wrote at a very primary level. When Duane wrote about his pet ducks, a subject on which he was an expert, Ted gently asked the following questions:

> You don't mention much about Oscar. Was Oscar originally laid by a duck?
>
> Then the turkey sat on the duck egg?
>
> So Oscar thought he was a turkey? Then does this part make sense? (Inserts section of what Duane has written)
>
> Stanley—was that a duck?
>
> Remember the time you told me one choked. When you said some ducks died, you didn't tell how they died. Could you do that?
>
> Who wants more ducks? You?
>
> Can you put some sentences together with some commas? (Gives examples of short sentences from Duane's writing)

With Liz, a talented writer, Ted questioned the generality of her subject and the lack of a good closing. Through his questioning, Ted helped Liz to narrow her topic and bring her piece to a close.

Ted began the year with pieces that were short, simple, and undeveloped. As time went by, Ted began to take more time with his writing. He commented, "Now I have more time with a story. I want to work more days on revision because I can take the time." Ted, like Mary, made revisions on his own as well as responded to a conference partner's suggestions. One of my questions when interviewing these students asked what they did first after conferencing. Ted's reply was, "Add something, take something out. I only use the suggestions I like." Unlike Mary, when Ted was through with a piece and ready to write a final draft, he would revise again when writing the final copy—not major revisions, but small changes in sentence order and wording.

Ted attempted fiction second semester and wrote a war story. He made several revisions as he wrote:

> Changed "The Vietnam War was very hard for everyone. There was one group of guys..." to "The Vietnam War made these men a family: Joe Piscoto..."
>
> Cut "If one was caught, the others would go, too."
>
> Cut name group called themselves.
>
> Changed "But now they had orders to head north" to "But now they had to head north."
>
> Inserted "The troupe had awakened: in proper place.
>
> Cut explanatory section about barracks.
>
> Cut entire section about a new mission.
>
> Added a closing in new paragraph about a reunion in 1983 and the men's memories of the war.

It is significant that Ted made the types and number of revisions he did on this fiction piece. Serving as his own critical reader had to take the place of personal experience.

Sally was a naturally curious girl who bombarded writers with questions when conferencing with them. When Sarah wrote about going to her grandmother's house, Sally was aware of missing details:

> What's your favorite part?
>
> Can you describe your grandmother?
>
> Is her place in Eau Claire?
>
> What kind of dog does she have?
>
> She doesn't live on a farm, does she?
>
> What do you do when you "horse" around with the dog?

Conferencing with Donna on a different day, Sally again demanded more information and served as a critical audience:

> How big is the monkey you are comparing to the wooly monkey? If I don't know how big the wooly monkey is, I won't know how big your monkey is.
>
> Did you say what color?
>
> Would you like to have a monkey?
>
> How did you pick this one to write about? Did you see it in a book?
>
> Does he stay to himself or is he friendly?

Sally's writing was much like her questioning. Information was put on paper in random fashion with no thought to lead, middle, or closing. She was very resistant to revision at first, seeing no importance in this part of the process

once her message was down. She began with small additions and some changes in wording as a result of questions by her conference partners. When she wrote about her brother's marriage, Sally asked me to conference with her. All of her information was written down as she remembered it with no sequential order. Because Sally wrote so prolifically, she was overwhelmed at the thought of putting several pages in narrative order. Showing Sally how to use chapters to divide her story helped her to control her writing. Asking her to tell what a particular section was about in one sentence gave Sally insight into what she was trying to tell. She settled on three chapters, i.e., feelings when getting the news, her future sister-in-law, and being included in the wedding party. So that Sally wouldn't be so discouraged, I read a section to her orally, she decided which chapter it belonged in, I cut the piece out, and she placed it in the appropriate "pile." From this stage on, she was able to work with one chapter at a time, taping the sections in sequential order, and adding transitional sentences where necessary. This technique also helped her to see when a section didn't fit in any of the three chapters, and she placed these extra pieces in her writing file to be used another day.

Another problem of Sally's was a problem I notice in many poor writers, and that is the use of too much dialogue. Here again, with help and encouragement, she could transfer dialogue to narration. Without help from a peer or me, Sally's revisions consisted of very minor changes. With help and conferencing, her changes in writing were meaningful changes.

Bill was an example of the kind of student all teachers know well. He felt that the less he wrote, the fewer mistakes he could make. He was sure there was nothing in his life worth writing about. And since he had so much difficulty writing, he was convinced he couldn't be of any assistance to another writer. He conferenced only with me or in small groups led by me for several weeks.

Since Bill's biggest problem was selection of a topic, many conferences dealt with helping him find a subject. As the year progressed, Bill began to feel better about writing. He was amazed to learn that others were interested in his BMX bike, his fights with his older brother, and in his stories about being "grounded" by his mother. When he found out these experiences were acceptable topics, he no longer needed conferencing to choose topics. He also was more sure of himself as a conference partner. He asked valid questions of Ted when conferencing with him:

> Did you stop at the stream and watch it for a while?
>
> Did Duane's dad or his brother do anything funny?
>
> What if Duane's dad's cycle wouldn't have started again?

Bill's own revisions consisted mainly of adding on. He rarely thought about audience and, during conferences, other students or I would find gaps in his stories. He found it hard to believe that we were interested in the small but significant details when he related an incident. When he returned to his seat to add to his story, he would decide where the missing information should go and carefully cut and tape neatly. He continued to erase rather than cross out on his first drafts and, if I crossed out for him or used arrows to demonstrate the shortcuts he could take, he appeared to be accepting the lesson. However, the next time he wrote, he would once again erase instead of crossing out. Neatness

was important to him.

Bill, as well as Sally, tried to answer all conference questions asked of him on his subsequent revisions. This trend was in direct contrast to Mary's and Ted's habit of rejecting questions when they felt those questions did not apply.

Contrasts were again apparent when observing the writing styles of these four children. Ted's and Mary's patterns of drafting looked very much alike. Listed below are the records of these two children for one period each:

Mary

Writes sentence from blackboard.
Volunteers information on sentence.
Begins working on draft after reading it.
Makes correction, crossing out.
Talks to neighbor.
Gets paperback dictionary from school bag.
Frowns.
Leaves seat to get large dictionary.
Looks up word.
Returns dictionary to shelf.
Writes.
Pauses.
Makes change on paper.
Leaves desk to talk to teacher.
Writes.
Talks to neighbor.
Writes.

Ted

Completes sentence from blackboard.
Leaves desk.
Talks to neighbor.
Continues draft begun yesterday.
Pauses.
Writes.
Checks prewriting time line made on prior day.
Chews pencil.
Rereads material he has just written.
Leaves desk to get transparent tape.
Writes paragraph.
Reads paragraph.
Writes.

Obviously, Ted and Mary have characteristics like those children Calkins calls interactors.[11] They are able to gain distance from their writing by leaving it momentarily. They reread and write, moving back and forth between the two steps. They are able to internalize what they have written and serve as their own audience. Much of this internalization takes place before pencil is ever put to paper. Ted, in an interview, told me how he chose a topic. "I decide if I would have enough information, if it would make sense, if it would make a good piece."

Mary indicated, "I plan a piece in my head, but I plan as I write, too;

sometimes I change my plans."

Bill's and Sally's logs looked different, not only from Ted's and Mary's, but from each others:

Bill

Mouths sentence from blackboard.
Writes sentence.
Leaves desk for draft paper.
Sees teacher for help.
Begins writing.
Looks up word in dictionary.
Erases.
Writes word correctly.
Contines to write slowly.
Completes draft.
Rereads draft, making mechanical corrections.

Sally

Reads sentence from blackboard silently.
Writes sentence.
Shrugs shoulders.
Gets pack of draft paper.
Writes rapidly for several lines.
Adds a few periods.
Writes again.

Obviously, Bill and Sally have little or no thought of audience. They rarely pause to reread and, if they do, they read for the purpose of making mechanical corrections. They usually erase instead of crossing out. Graves might say that, for these two writers, getting the message down is hard enough.[12] Revision comes only after conferencing and is overwhelming because they can't look at their drafts easily, part by part, as Mary and Ted do. Sally did no planning before writing and, because of this, often wrote on subjects chosen with little thought. When Bill had to begin a new piece of writing, he might sit for an entire period trying to think of a topic. He, like Sally, had no prewriting strategies when assignments were not made and when he was forced to generate his own topic. Because these students were not able to internalize, I wondered how they were able to conference effectively with others and what types of questions they asked on a regular basis.

I did not feel a taxonomy such as Bloom's was appropriate for the evaluation of these students' questions since the writers or I may not have correctly interpreted the questioner's meaning or desired outcome. Because the validity of placing these questions in a taxonomy of comprehensiveness objectively seemed unlikely, I chose to divide the questions into three categories. One type of question concerned specific details that could be easily answered by the writer. Examples might be "Where does your grandmother live?" or "Did you stop at the stream—look at it for a while?" The second type of question was a general question that usually required some reflection or further research on the part of the author. These questions were often "how" or "why" questions. Examples are "How did you feel about Mrs. Nelson?" and "Why did you choose this subject?" The third type of question involved syntax. Examples are "Can you combine some

sentences?" and "You say I like dancing *a lot*, and so do *a lot* of other people. That's repeating." For expedience the first type calling for specific details will be called Type 1 questions in the balance of this paper. Questions calling for further reflection or research will be referred to as Type 2 questions, and those concerning syntactical structure will be referred to as Type 3 questions.

In looking at these categories, an observer might feel that questions requiring reflection or research would be superior to the other two types. But students who have difficulty writing are often overwhelmed by this type of questioning and cannot do the revising asked for in the conference. In this stage of their growth, the students are more likely to revise when asked questions dealing with specific details or syntactical structure.

However, the possibility exists that a specific detail question might trigger reflection in writers, causing them to revise more than anticipated. The table below shows the questioning emphasis of each of the four writers studied:

	Total Questions	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3
Mary	110	19	55	36
Ted	70	41	23	6
Sally	70	26	44	0
Bill	40	24	16	0

Obviously, the good writers do not have a monopoly on Type 2 questions. Sally, as well as Mary, had more Type 2 questions than Type 1 or Type 3. Interestingly, Bill and Sally do not ask questions regarding syntax. It could be theorized that they don't ask syntactical questions because they are both unaware and unsure of desired grammatical and syntactical structures.

I used the same categories when looking at the types of revisions these children made. The following table indicates the types of revisions made:

	Total Revisions	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3
Mary	112	22	43	47
Ted	57	3	25	29
Sally	59	20	19	20
Bill	52	31	16	5

The statistics indicate that Sally and Bill were able to make revisions that required reflection or further research on their part. In all cases these revisions followed Type 2 questions from a conference partner. It appears, then, that Sally and Bill could do this type of revising effectively if problems were brought to their attention. They failed to make these revisions, however, without help which indicates their inability to distance themselves from their own writing and become readers of their own discourse. This inability to internalize the conferencing technique and use it with their own writing seems significant since they asked Type 2 questions of other writers. Sally also made Type 3 revisions but, in examining her drafts, I found these revisions to be a result of Type 2 questions asking her for specifity. Instead of adding detail to show what she meant, Sally, looking for stronger words, merely changed adjectives in her sentences.

In examining Ted's and Mary's drafts, I found an uneven distribution of the types of revisions when I scrutinized single drafts. I found earlier drafts contained mainly Type 2 revisions, and later drafts of the same pieces involved mostly syntactical revisions. Ted and Mary appear to look at syntactical revisions as a final editing process after they are satisfied with content.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusions

When examining all of the data, certain conclusions seem evident. Poor writers, as well as good writers, have the ability to conference with their peers. Bill and Sally asked many questions which induced writers to use specific details in their stories. They also demonstrated that they can ask questions calling for reflection or further research even though they need help with this type of revision in their own writing. Progress in Bill's and Sally's writing from the beginning of the school year to spring was so dramatic that we might hypothesize that asking questions of others may be leading to better writing on Bill's and Mary's own part. Further studies are needed to document this claim, however.

Prewriting or rehearsal techniques and internalization, using oneself as audience, are crucial components of the writing process. Ted and Mary used these processes even though their educational backgrounds were the same as Sally's and Bill's. Studies need to be conducted to see how and why certain children learn these techniques. Do students like Sally and Bill, who did not master these components by the end of sixth grade, reach this stage in their development naturally or must greater stress be placed on teaching poor writers to perform these stages in the writing process? I'm not sure if intelligence is a factor in the ability to internalize or if all children reach this stage eventually with process writing.

My study showed a positive relationship between good writing and good conferencing, but, at the same time, it showed that students do not need to be good writers to conference well. The data probably indicate that more time should be spent teaching poor writers to conference since good writers handled the technique quickly and with a minimum of coaching by the teacher.

Sally and Bill were dependent on the questions asked by conferencing peers. We can assume that little or no revision would have been achieved by these writers without the conferencing sessions. Therefore, conferencing is critical for these students—at least in this stage of their development.

However, teachers must be careful when teaching children to conference and when serving as a model for conferencing. Poor writers are likely to use all suggestions from a conference, thus having ownership of their writing compromised. Conference partners must be cautioned against taking over someone's writing and making decisions for another. They must question rather than say, "You should..."

Inversely, Mary and Ted did not limit their revision to answering questions asked of them in conference sessions. The ability to gain distance from their writing and serve as their own audience meant that, while conferencing often

helped these writers by giving them an alternative audience, they could revise on their own. In truth, they could "conference with themselves." Teachers must stress the importance of revision, however, or even these students are unlikely to spend the time trying to make their writing better. In nearly all instances, when these four students revised, I found that the revisions they made improved the piece on which they were working.

This study points out the positive results of conferencing for young writers. Teachers need to be aware of the merits of conferencing as a technique for helping students improve their writing. Students learn how to ask good questions quickly and effectively in most cases.

The chance to conference with good writers and to hear their stories appears to help poor writers improve their own writing much more quickly than they would without this opportunity. Too often, adults fail to see what powerful teachers peers can be for each other.

My study with these children also showed the close relationship between reading and writing. James Squire calls composing and comprehending "two sides of the same basic process."[13] I observed Ted and Mary continually integrating the two processes. Mary tried to write two stories in one after reading a book using two interwoven plots. When I interviewed Ted and Mary, they told me they learned different technqieus of writing from their own writing. After I taught the students to use flashback in their writing, Ted and Mary, along with many other students, brought library books to me to show me this skill when they found it used by another author. Longitudinal studies are necessary to show educators what gains are made when children write early. Would Bill and Sally be at least average readers and writers if they had begun writing on a daily basis when their formal education began or are there other factors that would prevent them from reading well? (Neither student was diagnosed as learning disabled).

Even though Bill and Sally are still poor writers in my estimation, their improvement during the year suggests daily writing classes are as important as daily reading classes.

Finally, teachers need to be aware of the research done with young writers as well as of the many questions that remain. Observations or data collected in the natural environment of the classroom can be significant in helping all teachers to learn how children develop as writers and how they can best help them at each stage of development.

Notes

[1]Lucy McCormick Calkins, "Workshop on Writing Process," West Central Wisconsin Writing Project, Eau Claire, WI, June, 1981.

[2]Calkins, June, 1981.

[3]Calkins, June, 1981.

[4]Donald R. Murray, *Learning by Teaching* (Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook Publishers, Inc., 1982), pp. 51, 52, 69, 80.

[5]Janet Emig, *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders* (Urbana, IL: The National Council of Teachers of English, 1971), pp. 91-93.

[6]Murray, pp. 85-87.

[7]Donald H. Graves, *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* (Exeter, NH: Heinemann Educational Books, 1983), pp. 18, 19-31.

[8]Calkins, "When Children Learn to Punctuate: Basic Skills Belong in Context," *Learning Magazine*, February, 1980, pp. 86, 87.

[9]Calkins, "Children's Rewriting Strategies," *Research in the Teaching of English*, 14 (1980): pp. 331-341.

[10]Graves, pp. 37-39.

[11]Calkins, "Children's Rewriting Strategies," pp. 333-334.

[12]Graves, pp. 86, 87.

[13]James Squire, "Composing and Comprehending: Two Sides of the Same Process," *Language Arts* May, 1983), p. 582.

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APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

How do you discover or think of your topic?

How does conferencing help you to revise?

Do you think about an audience when you write?

How do you revise when you haven't conferenced?

Do you sometimes read a draft after leaving it for a day and then think the draft sounds bad? Why do you think you change your mind about how your writing sounds?

How do you know when you have written a good draft?

How does my teaching help you to revise?

Do you reread parts of your draft to yourself when writing? If so, how does this help you?

What is the first thing you do after conferencing?

Do you plan a whole piece in your head before your actual writing or do you plan as you write?

When you conference with another writer, what kinds of questions do you ask the writer?

What do you do when you're stuck and can't write?

How do you decide what to include?

How do you decide what to cut?

What part of writing is hardest for you? Why?

How do you know when your piece is finished and you are ready to write the final draft?

Do you think being a good reader helps you in your own writing? Why or why not?

How does grading help or get in the way of your writing?

How do you feel when I won't make your writing decisions for you or tell you how long your piece should be?

Are there days when you simply can't write? What do you do if this happens?

What prewriting techniques do you use when I don't tell you to use a particular one?

How do you choose a topic?

What kinds of conference questions help you the most?

If you feel you are not on the right track, what do you do to get your piece the way you want it?

Now that you revise in your own writing, do you notice more things in other authors' writing? What do you notice that you didn't see before?

What else would you like to tell me about your writing, especially conferencing and revising?

Ted, Draft 1*

The Vietnam war was very hard for everyone. There was one group of guys that turned into a family. Joe Piscoto, Henry Blodget, Bob Marlon, Tom Bradly, and Gary Comord. They were a family because they loved each other and cared for each other. If one would get hurt, the others would get hurt. The others would sacrifice their own life. If one was caught, the others would go, too. They called themselves "The Family."

They were in many dangerous situations. For instance once they were lost into the jungle and low on food, the communists were coming. It was luck if you want to call it that that Henry had been shot in the leg and bleeding bad. Joe and Tom made a stretcher and carried Henry while Gary led and Bob watched from behind. They barely made it to a base and told the colonel that the comy's were coming.

The colonel gathered his men and surprised the communists, they retreated very fast. Henry was lucky, he would be back on his feet in about a week and a half.

But now they had orders to head north to help a post hold its position. It was a long way so they took a helicopter.

When they finally got there, they ate and slept. Henry was waken by a gun shot. He woke up the rest of the guys, they grabbed their machine guns and got back in bed and pretended to be asleep. When the communists kicked the door in they sat up and blew them away. Bob was the first to get up and see what had happened. They went to the front door and found George Cole shot in the gut. As George was dying he said, "Did you get them?"

Joe said, "Yes, we did." Then George died. Just then the troupe came from the barracks. They said, "They must have killed the guards." They called Seoul and ordered more troupes and then left. Their mission was over because the Communists heard about the incident and retreated.

Later that day, around 13 hundred hours they left their mission. Their next orders were to head east to help a village. It was 300 hundred miles away. They took a plane 250 miles and had to drive the rest of the way. It was a hard drive over rough roads that had been shelled many times.

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*Spelling errors on the drafts have been corrected. Other mechanical errors have been left as they appeared on the drafts. Homophones have not been corrected.

Ted, Final Draft

The Vietnam War made these men a family, Joe Piscoto, Henry Blodget, Bob Marlon, Tom Bradly, and Gary Comord. They were a family because they loved each other and cared for each other. If one would get hurt, the others would get hurt. The others would sacrifice their own life.

They were in many dangerous situations. For instance communists were coming. It was luck if you want to call it that that Henry had been shot in the leg and bleeding bad. Joe and Tom made a stretcher and carried Henry while Gary led and Bob watched from behind. They barely made it to a base and told the colonel that the comy's were coming.

The colonel gathered his men and surprised the communists, they retreated very fast. Henry was lucky he would be back on his feet in about a week and a half.

But now they had to head north to help a post hold its position. It was a long way so they took a helicopter.

When they finally got there, they ate and slept. Henry was waken by a gun shot. He woke up the rest of the guys. They grabbed their machine guns and got back in bed and pretended to be asleep. When the communists kicked the door in they sat up and blew them away. Bob was the first to get up and see what had happened. They went to the front door and found George Cole shot in the gut. (The troupes had waken and just came to the door). As George was dying he said, "Did you get them?"

Joe said, "Yes, we did." Then George died. They called Seoul and ordered more troupes and then left. Their mission was over because the Communists heard about the incident and retreated.

Now (1983) they were having a reunion and remembering their hard long days in Vietnam.

Sally, Draft 1

When my brother told me that he was going to get marriaged, I said, "Oh" and then I said really. I ask him when, he said June 1984. I said that long? Then when are you getting engaged? Feb 14 I said what a great day to Valentines Day. If you are wondering what Mary looks like, she is 5'3, short brown hair and is a very nice person. I'm glad they are getting marriaged because they are a perfect couple. My brother is always talking about being marriaged. And I'm kind of shy about him talking about that. When Mary comes over, my brother and her just talk and talk. Then my mom asked who was going to be in the wedding. He said, "I don't know who is. Mary is going to pick. Oh wait I do to Tami, my sister is and Mary's friend and so on. My mom said, What about Sal. He said he didn't know about me. I was sort of mad and then relieved. My brother said I could be the guest book person and the punch bowl person. I said I didn't want to. Then I said, I would, but I still don't know if I am. Sometimes I go to Marys house, and to her roommates house. Her roommate Jayne has a dog named Chess and we have lots of fun with her. I am sure going to miss my brother because he is loving, careful, and understanding and I could go on and on. My brother is going to move to the cities. Then I can come and visit them. He is going to work with computers. She is going to work with retarded children. When they move, Mary will have a year left at the U. When Mary and Bob went to the Twin City and got the rings. My brother brought it to our house. I tried it on. It was way to small. One night Mary came over and she was trying to get my brother to get engaged that night. But my brother said you can wait until Monday and then Mary was making up excuses. One day when I was playing golf on the Atari, my brother

said call Mary and talk to her awhile. Then she said, "what did you do in school today?" I said, "nothing." My brother said, Sal should be in the wedding and they talked and talked." Today is Feb 14 my brother got engaged early in the morning. Now since he is engaged, he seem betternature and a lot nicer.

Today is Feb 15 a couple of days ago Mary's sister came to Eau Claire. My brother stayed out late and I think that was the night my brother said Mary got in a accident. A drunk driver hit the car in front of her and the car in front of her hit her. She came running in crying and my brother was saying, "What's the matter, Mary?" She said my car, I got in a accident. A couple days later my brother went and got some estimates. They were higher than my brother Bob thought. They were about $1,900. Mary's knees were hurting real bad and they found out what happened. Her knees hit the dashboard. That really must of hurt.

Sally, Final Draft

Chapter 1

When my brother told me that he was going to get married, I said, "oh," and then I said, "Really?" I asked him when.

He said, "June, 1984."

I said, "That long, then when are you getting engaged?"

"February 14."

I said, "What a great day, Valentines Day."

If you are wondering what Mary looks like, she is 5'3, has short brown hair, and is a very nice person. I am glad they are going to get married because they are a perfect couple. My brother is always talking about him getting married. I"m kind of shy about him talking about that. When Mary comes over, my brother just talks and talks. Sometimes I go to Mary's house and to her roommate's house. Her name is Jayne. Jayne has a dog named Chess. We have lots of fun with her.

I am sure going to miss my brother because he is loving, caring, and I could go on and on. My brother is going to move to the Twin Cities. Then I will come and visit.

He is going to work with computers. Mary is going to work with retarded children. When they move, Mary will have a year left at the college.

Chapter 2

My mom asked who was going to be in the wedding. Bob said, "I don't know who is. I don't know who Mary is going to pick. O wait, I do too, Tami and Mary's friend and so on."

My mom said, "What about Sal?: He said he din't know about me. I was sort of mad and then relieved. My brother said I could be the guest book person and the punch bowl server.

I said I didn't want to. Then I said I would. But I still don't know if I am.

One day when I was playing Atari, my brother said, "Call Mary and talk to her awhile."

Then she said, "What did you do inside today?"

I said, "Oh nothing."

When my brother was talking to Mary he said, "Sally should be in the wedding." Then all they did was talk, talk, talk.

Chapter 3

Mary and Bob went to the Twin Cities. They got the ring. My brother tried

it on me when he brought it home. Boy, it was way too small.

One night Mary came over. She was trying to get the engagement ring that night. My brother said, "You can wait until Monday." Then Mary was making up all kinds of excuses.

Early in the morning on Feb. 14 they got engaged. Now Mary is my future sister in law. Boy, that feels good.

Writer: Sarah Partner: Sally 1/11/83

My grandma's house looks kinda special to me because when I was little she would let me do a lot of things like feed the fish some of her leftover bacon sometimes but not all of the time. When I was through feeding the fish, I would always come back to the house and smell the fresh smell of homemade soup waiting for me to slurp it up until it was all gone. When I was done, I would have to do my dishes, and that was the pits believe me. When I was done doing my dishes and didn't have nothing to do, Grandma would say she had something for me to do, go outside and horse around with her dog, Tippi. She always told me to be careful so Tippi doesn't bite me.

When I am all done playing with the dog my grandma would call my mom and tell her that I am all done playing and ready to go home and take my nap and get ready for kindergarten. When I got all done with school, my mom comes to pick me up and discuss all that I did at Grandmas that morning.

Sally: Ummmh. What's your favorite part?

Sarah: When I slurp up the soup.

Sally: Can you kind of describe your grandmother?

Sarah: She's kind of short and sort of chubby.

Sally: Is her place in Eau Claire?

Sarah: Yes, it's in Eau Claire—on River Drive.

Sally: What kind of dog does she have?

Sarah: It's part Lab and part something else.

Sally: She doesn't live on a farm, does she?

Sarah: No, but she's got a barn and everything.

Sally: What do you do when you horse around with the dog?

Sarah: Throw sticks and he brings them back to me and I throw balls.

Sally: I can't think of any more questions.

Sarah: Okay. I know what to add.

Writer: Ted Partner: Bill 3/8/83

One summer day I went to Duane's house. When I pulled in the driveway on my motorcycle, he was feeding his ducks. We went up to the house, and Duane's dad went into the garage. Danny, Duane, and I followed. He got out his 1970 Yamaha motorcycle. He got it started. It ran pretty good. Danny ran in the house and got the helmets. Duane rode with me and Danny rode with his daddy. They led the way. We went on a trail I had never been on. It was a beautiful ride. The woods were

green. There was even a little steam running through one spot. Duane's dad had trouble in some spots. He finally came out at Fox Run.

I said, "I know where I am now." We went inside and we all had a Mountain Dew. When we were done with our pop, we took off. Duane's dad was leading. We got a ways away when Duane's dad's motorcycle hit a muddy spot and they fell. I laughed so hard that I hit the same spot and we fell. We got up and laughed. Then we drove off. The rest of the way back was better, but at one point I went too fast and they couldn't keep up, so I had to turn around and go back and get them.

Finally we got home. We were so hot that we decided to go swimming. So we did. We swam for quite a long time. It was getting real late so I had to go home. I had a fun day and I was sad to go home.

Bill: Did you stop at the stream and watch it for a while?

Ted: No, it was nice though.

Bill: Did Duane's dad or his brother do anything funny?

Ted: Well, Danny wore this one helmet—it was really strange. It was all straight. It didn't have anything over the ears. I should put that in. I forgot about that.

Bill: What if Duane's dad's cycle wouldn't have started again?

Ted: It's lucky it did. We would have had a long walk.